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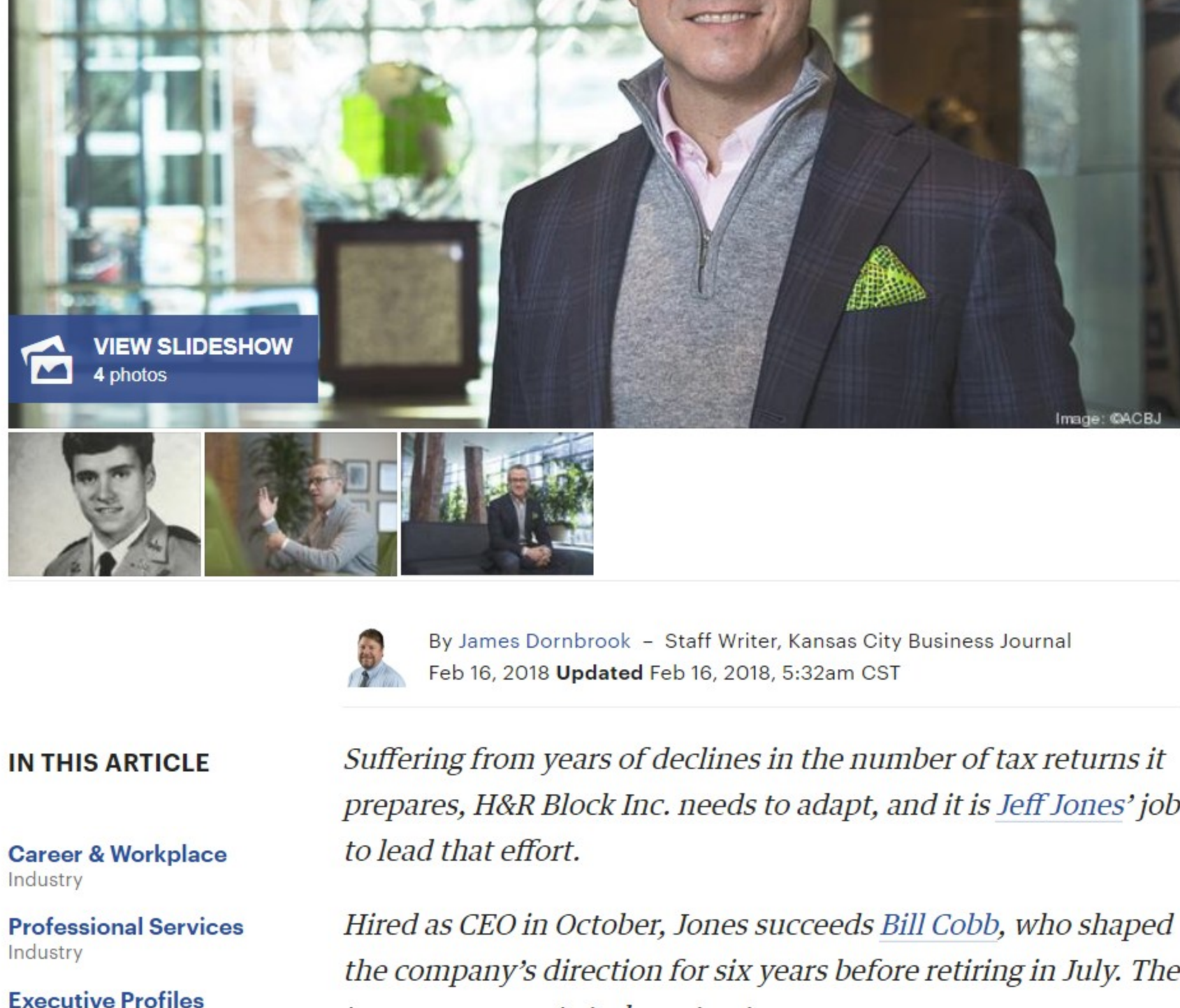
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By James Dornbrook - Staff Writer, Kansas City Business Journal
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Suffering from years of declines in the number of tax returns it prepares, H&R Block Inc. needs to adapt, and it is Jeff Jones' job to lead that effort.

Hired as CEO in October, Jones succeeds Bill Cobb, who shaped the company's direction for six years before retiring in July; The two men present stark contrasts.

Cobb, 60, was more of a top-down leader who exhibited a heavy focus on shareholders. He sold off noncore businesses, such as RSM McGladrey and H&R Block Bank, to generate cash for dividends and share repurchases.

Jones, 50, has an extensive background in marketing for big companies and big brands. His focus moving forward is on the customer, looking to drive business from the ground up.

Although he's been at H&R Block for only five months, Jones already is at work building a new culture, one that draws on his vast experience.

Getting his bearings

Jones grew up in Parkersburg, W.Va., a railroad town of about 31,000 at the confluence of the Ohio and Little Kanawha rivers.

A good athlete in school, he had dreams of playing Major League Baseball. His parents were entrepreneurs, running a variety of businesses, from restaurants to video rental to tanning salons.

"I watched my parents, without education, work so hard," Jones said. "My work ethic clearly comes from my parents. When I was in eighth grade, we went bankrupt. We lost everything. We lost our house and had to move.

"On my 16th birthday - I remember this like it was yesterday - my dad borrowed \$1,500 from one of his brothers and bought me a used car. My dad didn't even have a car; he lost his car."

After high school, Jones went to Fork Union Military Academy in Virginia to play baseball. In his year there, he learned that he wasn't good enough to play professionally but could become a good student if he applied himself.

In 1990, Jones graduated from the University of Dayton - the first in his family to get a degree - with a bachelor's in communications; he also studied marketing and psychology.

"I had an interest in psychology, but coming from entrepreneurs, I also had this business interest, and marketing really is, in my opinion, the best combination of bringing together business acumen and consumer behavior," he said.

Building his brand

After graduating, Jones set his sights on working for one company: advertising giant Leo Burnett. He moved to Chicago, near the agency's headquarters. He had to settle for a job waiting tables because Leo Burnett rejected him three times, but on his fourth attempt, he got a job with the agency.

"There were about 12 people hired in that class, and I was the only one without an MBA and without an Ivy League education," Jones said. "I was what Leo Burnett called an off-the-street hire. That literally meant I just walked in off the street."

His bosses asked whether he wanted to stay in Chicago and start in the media department or move to Detroit and jump into client service and account management. He chose Detroit.

"That decision really helped accelerate the early part of my career because I was willing to move," Jones said. "In exchange for that, I got immensely great training right off the bat."

He worked on brand-building initiatives and advertising programs for companies like Procter & Gamble, Miller Brewing and General Motors.

After six years at Leo Burnett, Jones left to take a job as global account director for Coca-Cola.

From there, Jones racked up experience working with - and founding a couple - smaller agencies. He helped start a firm called POV Partners, which Whittman-Hart acquired. In 2001, he founded LB Works, getting his first CEO title. That company did marketing for Starbucks, Altoids, Gateway, EarthLink, Heidelberg and Lexmark.

Jones spent two years as executive vice president of global marketing for Gap Inc. In 2006, he became president and minority shareholder in an agency called McKinney, which did work for Virgin Mobile, Nationwide, Travelocity, Sherwin-Williams, Gold's Gym, Nike, Sony and many other well-known brands.

Jones made a name for himself after joining Target in 2012 as its chief marketing officer. He became a public face for the retailer as it tried to regain shoppers' trust after a high-profile data breach that grabbed national headlines and led to an executive shakeup.

Uber turned to Jones in 2016 as that company's rapid growth story began attracting attention from would-be rivals and regulators. The company created the new position of president for Jones.

But Uber's troubles multiplied, with criticism of founder Travis Kalanick and allegations of sexism and sexual harassment. Jones left after six months. He has declined to talk about his time with Uber beyond a carefully worded statement saying his beliefs and approach to leadership weren't consistent with what he saw and experienced there.

Jones hit the job market just as H&R Block began looking for a new CEO who could, as Chairman Robert Gerard said, "take this company with strong tax capabilities across the board and take it to another level."

A 'genuine, authentic leader'

Tim Curoe, former senior vice president of talent and organizational effectiveness at Target, hired Jones as the retailer's chief marketing officer and then built a team around him.

"If you think about who people want to follow, they want to follow someone they trust and believe in," Curoe said. "Jeff exudes the qualities of a genuine, authentic leader, who is a fabulous listener and works closely with his team. People find that very approachable and easy to connect with.

"We hired four senior officers under him at Target, and they all said the biggest reason they came there was because they wanted to work for him."

Dustee Jenkins, former chief communications officer for Target, said she watched Jones modernize and evolve the company's marketing team.

Jones took over from Michael Francis, who had a reputation as a brand genius and a pioneer in marketing. Jones immediately let people know that he was not going to try to fill Francis' shoes but was going to do things his way.

"Rather than coming in and setting an agenda and then driving it, he had conversations with people," Jenkins said. "I'll never forget sitting around the table with the leadership team and listening to Jeff talk about his values. Some of it was about his family and some about business, but mostly about how he wanted to show up and lead. It was about trust, empathy and other things.

"I was so struck that he wasn't coming in saying we were going to work harder and faster. Interestingly, those things came, but he first tapped into the emotional side of us."

She said Jones shared a book called "Obvious Adams: The Story of a Successful Businessman." It's a business classic about how people often are so focused on complex and difficult things that they miss the simple solution right in front of them.

"I would come in to him with this beautiful deck and have thought through something 65 different ways, and then he would ask me a question, and I would just kick myself because I missed the 'Obvious Adams' moment," Jenkins said. "More often than not, it was grounded in consumer behavior and consumer sentiment. What it forced you to do was to learn your customer better."

A deep introduction

Jones has taken the same approach to getting established at H&R Block.

"When you're a new leader, people are wondering and guessing about you," he said. "Everything I say instantly gets spread and can easily become the phone game you played when you were a kid. So what I try to think about is being as explicit as I can about who I am and what I value. I'm really focusing on communication, whether it's a video, a town hall or an email. I don't want to just be someone on the 18th floor. I want them to know who I am and how I make decisions."

Before he officially started, Jones sent his new colleagues a one-page report on who he is and what he's all about.

"It said: 'Here's my philosophy. Here's what I'm all about,'" Chief Information Officer Alan Lowden said. "He did that so people not only understood where he's coming from, but also to hold himself accountable to his principles. It just speaks to him having a genuine nature. Every interaction I've had with him since then just reinforces my first impressions. It's a great quality to really be who you say you are. It's very refreshing."

Lowden described Jones as an analytical thinker, someone who wants to be sure strategy is supported by facts, not anecdotes or lore.

Laura Scobie, H&R Block's vice president of insights, strategy and innovation, said Jones is an intense listener who can absorb reams of data and analyze it on the fly.

"I had a two-hour videoconference with him, where I had about four years of work to take him through," Scobie said. "After about two hours and 400 slides, I was totally exhausted and could barely put together a sentence. Jeff hadn't said anything the entire time.

"Then at the end, he said: 'Back on slide eight it said this, but a chart on slide 87 said this. If those two things are true at the same time, it would suggest...' and he shared a totally new idea. ... I was thinking, 'Oh my God, I need to go back and study all my stuff again and up my game.' I was super impressed."

Preparing a strategy

Jones' deep dive included a plan to spend 100 days traveling the nation to introduce himself to H&R Block employees and studying almost 20 years of company history to help guide development of a new strategy.

"We've now gone really deep into understanding our consumer, our potential consumer and all the pros and cons of our current business, from digital to assisted and hybrid products," he said. "We're digging deep and asking ourselves tough questions. The ultimate goal is how do we continue to improve the relevance of the H&R Block, as a way to grow. That's ultimately what we have to achieve. The strategy work is the way to get there."

Jones said he'll lean on H&R Block Tax Institute experts - whom he called the Navy Seals of the tax business - for industry-specific questions. For issues related to consumer behavior, he has plenty of experience to draw from.

"H&R Block is a consumer retail business," Jones said. "You're trying to convince consumers to choose you. In some ways, whether you're talking about Coke or The Gap or Target or Uber, it's exactly the same. What's your promise as a brand? How do you differentiate, and how do you execute? That feels very comfortable to me."

Getting to know KC

Jones was heavily involved in the Minneapolis community while at Target, and Curoe said he expects Jones will do the same thing in Kansas City.

"He understands how important it is for key businesses to be integrated into the community, so I think he'll embrace H&R Block being a key employer in Kansas City," Curoe said. "He'll really understand its importance to the community, and he'll spend time supporting the community, as well."

Jones said his interests include children's health, the arts (particularly photography) and technology entrepreneurship. He said he met with H&R Block co-founder Henry Bloch on several occasions and was pleased to learn they share many of the same interests.

"Obviously, his name in this community is very important," Jones said. "Over time, with different leaders of the company, it's been ebbing and flowing with how much it's been involved in the community. That's something I personally want to do, but it's really about finding the right thing."

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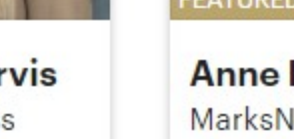
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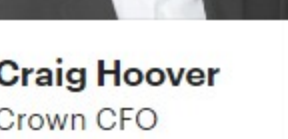
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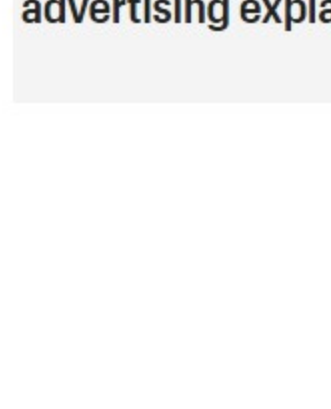
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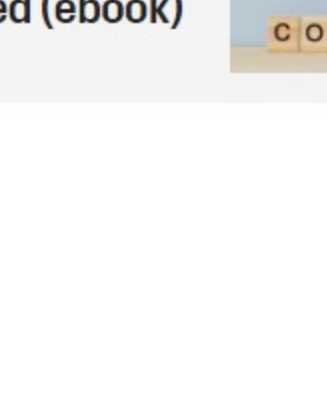


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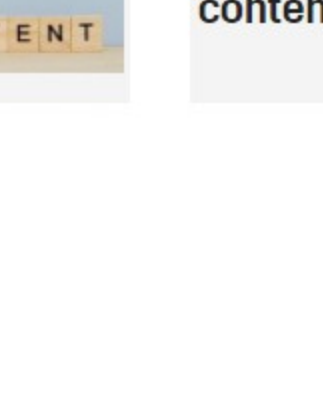
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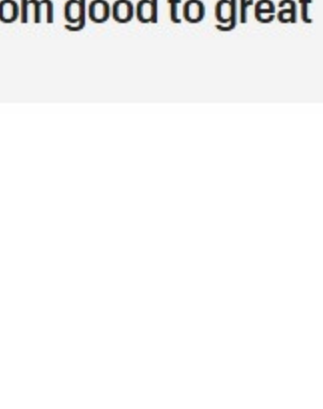
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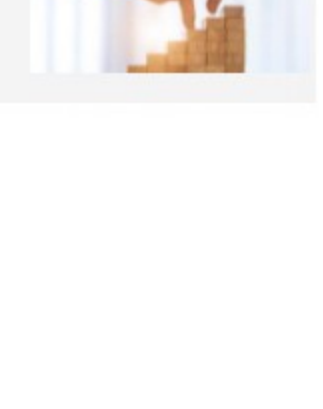
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